



# The Next of Round of Russia Sanctions is Already Flawed

By **John E. Sweeney** January 16, 2020

AP Photo/Manish Swarup

Here comes the next wave of sanctions against Russia. The House is expected to take up new Russian sanctions this year as the political class and media continue the anti-Russia drumbeat that started after the 2016 presidential election — blaming Russia for all our domestic woes because of the outcome. The non-stop barrage has dangerously narrowed the possibility for any policy debate. Suggestions we repair relations are translated into claims that the administration is aligned with the Kremlin.

Sanction policies were developed to influence a target's economic well-being in order to affect their behavior and protect our national interests. Economic sanctions have served as the U.S. foreign policy instrument of choice for decades now, and the U.S. has the advantage of using sanctions over most other nations simply because our economy is larger. When sanctions are levied, we hope to effect a positive change. Yet the Democrats intend to use an effective foreign policy tool as punishment and turn it into a political weapon against the president. We can only surmise that this makes political sense for the Democrats because it is an election year. The House Democrats, led by Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the mainstream media, are creating an untenable position with a country with which we are not at war.

This sustained layering of sanctions on Russia has produced unintended consequences. The critical flaw in pursuing this policy is overuse — nobody has stopped to look at what pulling the same lever over and over again is doing. Because of that shortsightedness, we have not contemplated the long-term effects, so China took advantage of our perpetual focus on Russia and rushed in to fill the void. China and Russia now are working together, something the U.S. government has deftly maneuvered to avoid for decades. It seems that the more pressure we place on them, the greater cooperation between the two. We must recognize that continuing to snub Russia is myopic and is proving counterproductive, not the least because it enhances Beijing's reach.

A good example of this was seen last October when China, Russia, and India established an alternative to the SWIFT global payment mechanism, creating a workaround to equalize trade with countries facing American sanctions. This should not have happened and is not in America's best interest to have Russia's financial messaging system linked to China's cross-border interbank payment system, out of reach of our monitoring. We have set up a no-win game by weakening a powerful foreign policy tool with overuse.

How did we get here? Implementing sanctions is quick and easy to administer, plus it plays well in most lawmakers' districts at election time when they are keen to point to some tangible accomplishment. The same can be said for presidents. There is little doubt this has led to the proliferation of sanctions as the go-to foreign policy tool.

Since we are so efficient at lowering the sanctions boom, you would assume that getting off the list is as simple as getting on it, far from it. The process is ad hoc, with nothing coordinated between relevant agencies and departments. There is no road map for removal from the sanctions list. Not providing a clear route, diplomatic or otherwise, for sanctioned countries and entities is a real issue with real consequences for the U.S. when those countries create workarounds.

What's needed is an attempt at rapprochement. We should engage Russia rather than drive them into China's orbit. An increase in diplomatic efforts will provide both sides with a better baseline for discussion and produce positive progress in our relationship. Less than a generation ago, the United States Cold War policy with regard to Russia showed great restraint and looked for openings to further détente. Calm relations with Russia have always helped with European security and improvement of the strategic balance in the region. We should embrace diplomacy as they did a generation ago — the old stalwarts at the State and Commerce Departments understood the need for sustained dialog, for fostering commercial trade that helps stabilize relations, and for other prudent means — instead of just sanctions.

To be clear, sanctions are useful and have proved effective in the past. What I am illuminating here is that sanctions are overused and often imposed for purely political reasons with little thought about whether they are in America's long-term interests. Threatening to levy more sanctions and not providing a clear process for sanctioned countries to get sanctions lifted puts everyone in a lose-lose situation.

The House adding even more sanctions on Russia to bash the president in an election year is not the answer. Let's get back to the table and renew dialog without fear of being accused of being in the pocket of the Kremlin because we want to practice the art of diplomacy. It's time we advanced our interests as a nation, instead of inflicting harm on ourselves for domestic political purposes.

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